

You're wealthy, you live in Vietnam and you've got money to invest. So what do you do with it? With so many restrictions on taking money out of this country, your options are limited; gold, the stock market, business (the popular option these days is F&B) and real estate. While the expansion of the new suburbs is focused on creating new housing for a modern Vietnam and on relieving the pressures of high urban population density, there's another motive at work — investing in real estate.

Yet building new suburbs and moving people from houses into apartments has other connotations; it affects and changes lifestyle. Despite being controlled by different regimes, in

Saigon and Hanoi in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, apartment blocks were built to replicate the traditional living areas of Vietnam's villages and cities. Whether the underlying ethos was socialist or capitalist, there was a focus on community; all the blocks had communal areas or public spaces, and internal passages that doubled up as alleyways.

The high-rise suburbs of today often miss this. A corridor is a corridor, it's not a place to communicate or meet others. While there are definite exceptions, public spaces and in particular green spaces are at a minimum. Yet this doesn't mean they should be dismissed.

Take a two-hour flight to Singapore and you can see how this city-state has put the high-rise model to good use. Over 5

million people crammed into an island the same size as Phu Quoc, and yet there is still greenery, still space to breathe, and an affluent lifestyle that has become the envy of the rest of Asia.

Will Vietnam be able to boast the same success? We don't know. At the moment developers are obsessed with tapping into the middle class — unlike in Singapore, little focus is placed on the lower end. What we do know is that suburban living and Babel-like tower blocks are here to stay, with not a white picket fence in sight.

The suburbs. We welcome you, not with open arms, but with a knowledge that this is 21st-century Vietnam and that like you or not, you are here to stay.

Photos by Julie Vola, Jesse Meadows, Bao Zoan and Rodney Hughes





Khu Phố Mới

A low-angle, upward-looking photograph of several modern high-rise buildings. The buildings are constructed from light-colored concrete with a grid-like pattern of windows. Some sections of the buildings are covered in green safety netting, indicating ongoing construction. A construction crane is visible near the top of one of the buildings. The sky is a clear, bright blue with a few wispy white clouds. The perspective creates a sense of height and scale.

Building new suburbs
means replacing one set
of residents with another.

The former, socially
engineered for the
modern era, the latter,
displaced. Words by
Jesse Meadows



Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City's skylines are full of cranes. The farther you drive into the cities' peripheries, the more you'll see, arcing across half-built towers in the distance. With a dense inner city in both metropolises and a fierce drive to modernise, Vietnam's major cities have fanned the flames of rapid urban expansion.

So rapid, in fact, that while researching this article in Hanoi's My Dinh area, real estate agents tried to sell me a condo for VND60 billion on the sidewalk. The only catch — it wasn't even built yet. "2017!" they said excitedly, pointing across the road at yet another crane that was swinging away over scaffolding.

Called *khu do thi moi*, or new urban areas, these self-contained (sometimes gated) communities are already common in the West. Complete with services like schools and shopping malls, they've begun to spread like wildfire across Asia in recent decades.

"New urban areas are trying to engineer the modern Vietnamese man and woman,

who go to the supermarket to get their groceries, work in the city, have two kids like in the happy propaganda posters, and live in a self-contained unit," says urbanist Danielle Labbe.

She's been studying Hanoi's urban expansion since 2005 (when the number of new urban areas had already reached 137), and did a PhD on the subject. Now she trains the next generation of Vietnam's city planners to study its growth and is well placed to explain how and why Hanoi's new urban areas have exploded across the map.

COMPLETE NEIGHBOURHOODS

In the early 1990s, the government allowed several state-owned construction companies to repurpose agricultural land on the outskirts of the city for residential development. Experts agreed that Vietnam's traditional urban design — tiny alleys winding through high-density superblocks — were not an ideal image for a country that wanted a seat at the international table. They needed new, modern cities to fit their goals

for growth. Thus, the *khu do thi moi* were born.

The government required that the new urban areas be at least 60% high-rise buildings, and that the construction be synchronised. "The housing comes at the same time as the services, supermarkets, schools, clinics, kindergartens. Everything is built at once, so they're complete [neighbourhoods]," says Danielle.

They were careful only to build on unoccupied land; villages watched as high-rises went up in their rice paddies. Have a look on Google Earth and you'll see the striking divide. Chaotic clusters of red and green roofs tightly hug the periphery of these new developments, which are starkly geometric and carefully planned in contrast.

Trung Hoa-Nhan Chinh to the southwest of Hanoi is one example of this. The new development is separated from the old village by Nguyen Thi Dinh Street. One side is all numbered towers, ornate villas, and Korean restaurants, while the other is tea shops and four-story cement houses.

Built by Vinaconex and finished in 2005,



Trung Hoa was the first fully commercial project in the capital. Ultimately, though, it's poorly integrated into the surrounding villages and lacking in public spaces, as most of them were sold off to developers in favour of more units and more profit (VND714 million). Starting at US\$32,000 for 100sqm, the price of Trung Hoa's units spiked tenfold in just five years. Now, they are completely out of reach for most of Hanoi's residents.

INTEGRATION

When I asked Danielle if there were any new urban areas she would consider a success, she pointed to Linh Dam, one of the first modern suburban developments in Hanoi. Construction began in 1999, and unlike Trung Hoa, the area was built the way it was designed, with ample green space. In the beginning, though, it was difficult to convince people to move in.

"They weren't interested in living in high rises," she says. "They were quite afraid that the elevator would break down, that you'd have to walk up 40 floors, that you'd have issues getting water, and power cuts. This was

the everyday situation in Hanoi at the time."

But the units were cheap, and soon, civil servants, teachers, nurses, and other members of the middle class began to move in. Today, around 7,800 people live in Linh Dam.

The influx of middle-class suburbia caused locals who had been living off the land for generations to look for new ways to adapt. In most cases, the government compensated each household with a stipend for revoking their land-use rights, and many used this money to build small lodging houses adjacent to their own, where students and low-income residents could stay for anywhere from VND700,000 to VND2 million per month.

Those who were lucky enough to have a house that directly faced the new developments found success with tea stalls and noodle shops. A handful of security and cleaning jobs were created within the gates of the new communities, but many locals found these jobs demeaning or boring.

Street vending inside the communities is not allowed, but Danielle found one man who managed to tweak his business model to survive these changes. Instead of selling

on the street, he calls his clients up on the phone and delivers to their apartments. "It's the same job, but in a different world," she remarks.

ON HOLD

With the current count of new urban areas hovering around 252, many are now sitting empty, built for investors in the fever of expansion, but in reality, too big or too expensive for the people who need housing the most. The market grew so big that it inevitably crashed, and experts now agree that the lack of affordable housing in the city is a huge problem. The Prime Minister has since ordered banks to stop granting loans for real estate projects.

"Now the whole cycle has stopped, which is a good thing, because it gives everyone some time to sit back, assess the situation and try to reorient policies," Danielle says. "The air, the cleanliness, the green — it's sought after, and it's understandable."

But something more has to be done to make this middle-class dream sustainable.